TWO TEMPLES, ONE GOD

A CONSIDERATION OF SIKH-CHRISTIAN INTER-FAITH RELATIONS IN A WEST YORKSHIRE URBAN PARISH

a dissertation by
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ABSTRACT

The project is based on the multi-cultural parish of St Thomas, Longroyd Bridge, Huddersfield; and specifically the faith communities at St Thomas's Church, and at the Shri Guru Nanak Gurdwara which is situated within the parish boundary.

The aims and methodology of the project are:

* to produce a literature-based review of some current issues in inter-faith relations - from a general perspective, and then from specifically Christian and Sikh perspectives;

* to survey views on Sikh-Christian inter-faith relations within the two faith communities, based on 'official' views, interviews, and discussion groups;

* to reflect on the material produced in order to discern ways in which members of different religious traditions can work together in God's service, both in the particular setting of the project, and in the wider community of faith.

The findings are that:

* whilst wishing to maintain their own integrity, both communities seek to view inter-faith relations positively and look for God's purpose therein;

* purposes which could be explored together, both locally and in a wider context, are the deepening of understanding in one's own faith through contact with another; and a shared social and spiritual mission to the wider society;

* the experience of working together as two distinct faiths suggests a new model of inter-faith relations - not the 'Copernican' model of Hick, in which each faith is a planet in a single solar system, but a 'Hubblite' model in which each faith is a solar system within a wider galaxy and universe.

DECLARATION

The work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.

Signed . ... Date ....1/9/99.....

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

ONE: BACKGROUND, AIMS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE PROJECT

Background

The project arose from my experience of a pastoral placement during my training with the Northern Ordination Course. The placement was in the parish of St Thomas, Longroyd Bridge, which is on the outskirts of Huddersfield Town centre.

The parish is multi-cultural and multi-faith (see **TWO** below), and contains a Sikh Gurdwara. The proximity of two worshipping communities from two different faiths excited an interest which I have long had in inter-faith relations, both as a junior school RE coordinator, a sometime seconded advisory teacher for RE, and a long time 'seeker' in matters of faith.

My own Christian background includes membership of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). This predisposed me to look with interest at the insights of other faiths, since Quakers seek to be "open to new light, from whatever source it may come" (Britain Yearly Meeting 1.02:7). It also caused me to sense affinities with Sikhism which not only has a similar open approach, but also teaches "There is a light among all; and that light is God's own self which pervades and enlightens everyone" (AG663, quoted Cole & Sambhi 1993 p196): this teaching is echoed by the Quaker belief that there is "'that of God in every man' [sic], a Divine Light that moves to illumine and transform" (Cell p9).

Quakers speak of seeking "new growing points in social and economic life" (Britain Yearly Meeting 1.02:33) and this attitude informs the Quaker approach to spiritual matters too. It had long been my conviction that the possibilities afforded by the late 20th century for interface between world faiths was one such social and spiritual growing point. The situation in St Thomas's parish seemed an ideal opportunity to investigate further, and thus the current project arose.

Aims

The aims of the project were: to produce a literature-based review of some current issues in inter-faith relations - from a general perspective, and then from specifically Christian and Sikh perspectives; to survey views on Sikh-Christian inter-faith relations within the two faith communities, based on 'official' views, interviews and discussion groups; to reflect on the material produced in order to discern ways in which members of different religious traditions can work together in God's service, both in the particular setting of the project, and in the wider community of faith.

Methodology

As recommended by Bell (pp33-34), research started with the literature, in order to form a theoretical framework for field data. Subsequent field research began with individual interviews which were largely unstructured: to avoid the danger of neglecting questions important to the communities (see Bell p93); and to facilitate the 'owning' of issues, which can be seen as providing legitimacy to a project (see Rowan & Reason p107). Questions arising from these initial interviews and the literature, were explored in focus groups. Following Neuman's recommendation (p245) that "members should be homogenous enough to reduce conflict", and to promote confidence, I used single-faith groups.

The respondents for both faiths represented a cross-section of their communities; and the Sikhs were fluent in English, thus minimising communication difficulties. However, "in general, interviewers of the same race or cultural heritage get a more accurate response to sensitive questions" (Neuman p250) and despite the great goodwill manifested by the Sikhs, they may have been less willing to address difficult issues within their own faith in the presence of a white Christian than were the Christian respondents. The time limits of the project restricted the opportunity to develop the relationships necessary to address this difficulty. The review of literature on Sikhism, too, suffered the limitation of being carried out by an 'outsider', and Chapter 4 might well have been entitled "A *View* of Sikh Views".

TWO: THE FAITH COMMUNITY AT ST THOMAS'S CHURCH

The information in this section is drawn from conversations with Fr Richard Giles and the community, and records held by Kirklees Council.

The parish of St Thomas's has always been small: the parish immediately to the south is about twice the area, and other neighbouring parishes have areas approximately three or four times greater despite all being in similar locations. This reflects the fact that the parish was 'created' in the mid 19th century to accompany a newly built church, financed by a wealthy mill owing family.

Thomas Starkey, the driving force behind the building of the church, had been much influenced by the Oxford Movement, and so from the outset St Thomas's was Anglo-Catholic. From the beginning, it also had a reputation for innovation, having the first surpliced choir in Huddersfield when it opened in 1859. Reordering has been another feature of the church's development this century: it was amongst the first churches in the area to dispense with choir stalls some 30 years ago, and had already moved its altar forward once before the major reordering at the beginning of this decade.

The 1950s saw an influx of immigrants from the Caribbean to Huddersfield, many of whom came to live in the inner-city housing near St Thomas's and began to attend due to its proximity, and the strong Caribbean Anglo-Catholic tradition. For a time St Thomas's became known as 'The West Indian Cathedral', and now about 30% of the regular congregation of 60-65 are Afro-caribbean, an ethnic group which accounts for about a quarter of the current parish population.

The early 1970s could be seen as a low point for the parish with extensive housing clearance and resulting depopulation. Between 1964/5 and 1974/5, the Electoral Register shows a decrease of 41% (after adjustment to reflect the change in voting age). The added effect of a spread in the Asian community has meant that up to half the reduced population which now remains in the parish are Muslim and Sikh. In the 1991 Census, Asian ethnic groups accounted for 50.4% of the population of the two settlements within which the parish lies. By the 1980s, the independent viability of St Thomas's was being questioned, and amalgamation with Huddersfield Parish Church was considered.

It was then that the most recent incumbent, Fr Richard Giles, came to St Thomas's and led the church into a new phase in which it found a role serving a congregation significantly augmented by members from outside the parish boundary, drawn by innovative worship in a dramatically reordered church. The church has now come to be seen as a diocesan resource in these areas.

THREE: THE FAITH COMMUNITY AT THE SHRI GURU NANAK GURDWARA

The information in this section is drawn from The Revd Philip Hanson's unpublished study *Beyond Sikh Children in Britain*, and my own conversations with the community.

The initial influx of Sikhs into Huddersfield was in response to the post-war appeal to the commonwealth for labour (see James, *Sikh Children in Britain*, OUP 1974, reviewed Hanson p6). According to James (in Hanson p5)

most of the original Huddersfield Sikhs were from the *Jat* caste. From my research, this remains the case and is accounted for by the fact that most of the community still has its roots in the Punjab, where the *Jats* are the dominant political economic group (see James, in Hanson p5). Today, the general influence on the Shri Guru Nanak Gurdwara of the Punjab, and political issues such as Khalistan are largely dependent on the make up of the Gurdwara Committee.

The original Sikh migrants tended to abandon the distinctive 5Ks in the search for work and social acceptability (see James, in Hanson p10), but my research visits show that in the current community there are many who observe the visible requirements of Khalsa membership. It is clear that both approaches are tolerated and their adherents respectful of each other, reflecting the liberal nature of the community which Hanson identified (p31).

By the early 1970s, "the Sikh community was housed in a fairly small area around the centre of Huddersfield" (Hanson p21) and its only gurdwara was a small converted house (ibid p9). The present community has spread throughout the town and is served by two purpose-built gurdwaras (reflecting a division of opinion over where a new building should be located (ibid p31)), both totally self-financed, of which the Shri Guru Nanak Gurdwara is one.

The original single-storey building of the Shri Guru Nanak Gurdwara, dating from 1974, had a hall extension in 1984-5, and the upper storey with dome was finished in 1996. It is now used by anything from 500 to 1000 Sikhs during the course of a normal Sunday morning, and significantly greater numbers on special occasions. There is an equal representation of men and women, and the attendance of whole family units ensures a full range of ages - although teenagers may tend to absent themselves.

FOUR: LOCATION OF THE PLACES OF WORSHIP

CHAPTER 2
GENERAL VIEWS OF INTER-FAITH RELATIONS

In this chapter, I shall outline some general issues raised by inter-faith relations, drawn from a review of literature.

ONE: A CHOICE

At the close of the 20th century, any consideration of religious faith, must take note of one overarching issue - that of pluralism. Improved communication has brought many of the world's cultures together in the home of anyone with a television; and the increasing mobility of labour in the last 50 years has brought the living representatives of many of these cultures into direct personal contact. Nowhere is this more true than in Britain which, having had a world-wide empire, has received members of the world wide community into its society.

With cultural pluralism has come the issue of pluralism in religious faith. Increased direct experience of different faiths being practised often within streets of each other in some of the world's major urban centres, and particularly in Britain, has necessitated the recognition that "No single religion, in spite of enormous efforts has succeeded in imposing its exclusive claims on others ... and religious pluralism is therefore a persistent *fact* in the long history of humanity" (Samartha p182). Those who have come to Britain's shores from the far corners of empire have come largely, not as Christians, but as followers of the faiths which were rooted in their cultures long before the arrival of British missionaries.

In today's world, a choice is clearly presented to believers: either to reject all faiths other than their own; or to countenance the fact of religious pluralism - together with the observation that "It seems impossible to make the global judgement that any one religious tradition has contributed more good or less evil, or a more favourable balance of good and evil than the others" (Hick, in Hick & Knitter p30) - and look for a way forward which takes positive account of the new situation.

The former course can lead to inter-faith *conflict*, the only resolution of which is the eradication of all faiths but 'the one which is true' - a goal which has so far proved beyond achievement. If, however, inter-faith *relationship* is sought, then an *acceptance* of the current situation is required: "It is only when we recognise and accept our diversity that positive inter-religious relations can be built." (Inter Faith Network p1)

TWO: AN AMBIGUOUS GIFT

To 'accept' a situation can be seen as a negative, passive response, a 'giving in' to circumstances. However, there is a more positive way of viewing circumstances and our response to them. It is surely possible to see all that befalls humanity as God's gift for that age. Seen in this light 'acceptance' is most fitting - the appropriate response to a gift, particularly one from God. Furthermore, acceptance of a gift should be gracious and not grudging. Indeed, acceptance can be seen as active rather than passive, in so far as it is the acceptance of a challenge. This is an attitude espoused by organisations such as The Inter Faith Network for the UK, which states: "We live in challenging times, with new opportunities for the development of inter-religious relations in the United Kingdom." (p1)

It is possible, of course, to read the challenge in reverse. To see God's gift as an unchanging Truth, and the challenge to believers that they maintain that Truth amidst the confusion of our age. However, as Cantwell Smith observes (1978 p141-2), everything in human experience is flux and change, and it would be possible to see religion as subject to the rules which God has given for the rest of our experience so that "It is no longer

possible to understand each 'religion' as a stable system. Any pattern that may exist or be conceived at any given time or place is in process of historical change." (Cantwell Smith, 1981 p21). Indeed Hick takes the view (expounded by Partridge in *John Hick and the Pluralist Hypothesis*, lecture for The Northern Ordination Course, 8/3/99) that because of the differences in historical periods, God could no more produce a revelation for all time than he could for all the varying cultures of the world.

THREE: A DIVISIVE WORD

Taylor (in Hooker & Sargant p viii) observes that the *Oasis of Peace* - a community of Jews, Muslims and Christians in Israel has a *House of Silence* which is available to all for prayer and meditation. This, perhaps, points not only to the limitations of words when dealing with the things of God, but also to their divisiveness. And although DiNoia (in D'Costa p129) reminds us that the ineffability of the transcendent has not prevented believers distinguishing between more and less appropriate words, it can be argued that we sometimes place more weight upon the words we use than they can bear.

One word, and the category it denotes, comes in for particular scrutiny from Cantwell Smith, and that is the very word 'religion' itself. He argues (1978 ch2) that until modern times 'religion' was not used to indicate fixed, distinct systems which could be 'true' or 'false' or exclusive of each other, but rather indicated a relationship to God or 'piety'. From this it follows that "The plural 'religions' ... is impossible so long as one is thinking of something in men's [sic] hearts, such as piety, obedience, reverence, worship (none of these words has a plural)" (ibid p43). Cantwell Smith observes (ibid) that "Religion as a systematic entity, as it emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is a concept of polemics and apologetics", and that (ibid pp43-44) the plural came into use as a way of characterising one's opponents.

Developing this line of thought in *Towards a World Theology* (1981), Cantwell Smith is concerned to seek out a "unity of humankind's religious history" seeing this as a reflection of unity in humankind and in God (p4). In support of this approach, he cites the ways in which various religions have developed out of others, and formed contexts for each other's development (p5), and shows how stories, practices and concepts have travelled across religions spreading their influence far and wide (pp6-17). He would have believers see themselves not as upholders of a particular religious tradition so much as "heirs to the whole religious history of humankind" (ibid p18), participating in all faiths by becoming part of their context (ibid pp43-44), and this as part of seeing one's community as the human community (ibid p188).

If the term 'religions' originates in polemic, that is not to say that polemic is not useful in the search for Truth, or truths; nor does becoming part of the context of a faith presuppose agreement with it: Cantwell Smith is not proposing unity between religions but in human religious history (ibid pp4-5), and the implication is that our category 'religions' which is used to separate can be seen as a human construct which obscures the fact that 'religion' in the singular can be a unifying term.

Kaufman (in Hick & Knitter) speaks of the way "humans created and developed the various religious traditions" (p7) and goes on to claim that religious prophets and writers "have taken themselves ... to be directly expressing *how things really are*", but that "Diverse conceptions and pictures seem best understood as the product of human imaginative creativity" (ibid). Gilkey (ibid p38) is more explicit, declaring that in the modern period, as the requirements of love came to outweigh those of faith "The doctrines of faith - creeds, confessions and even the words of scripture itself - began to be seen as human". It is therefore possible to see not only the category 'religions', but also the contents of each faith tradition as far less fixed than has been supposed.

FOUR: TOGETHER IN SPIRIT

Gilkey's use of 'love' draws us back to the question of the transcendent. Speaking of ecumenism, at a time when he was also opening himself to other faiths, Thomas Merton wrote that "To me it is enough to be united with people in love and the Holy Spirit" (letter to Etta Gullick, quoted in Shannon p265). And it is towards the Spirit that Samartha looks for positive movement in the future:

> "The Spirit provides the expanse of wider space where people of different religions can move more freely than within the structures provided by institutions. Therefore the promise of the Spirit to move people towards the fulness of Truth and life needs to be taken far more seriously in the inter-faith dialogues in the coming years" (p185).

Whilst appeals to The Spirit still leave open the question of our different understandings of its nature, operation and purposes, they nonetheless remind us that, as Cantwell Smith observes (1978 p128), "God does not reveal religions; He reveals Himself" and that allegiance to a religion can in fact be a distraction from allegiance to God (see ibid pp126-7). In Hick & Knitter (p60) Cantwell Smith even goes so far as to warn that theologies are conceptual images of God and that these images can become idols.

Hick, in his introduction to Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* reminds us of the Chinese situation in which one might 'belong' to Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism all at the same time (p xii-xiii); and J B Cobb Jnr (in D'Costa p88) points out that this is because all three are held together under the communal "horizon" of being Chinese. If we maintain that we are all held within the community of humanity, and by a primary allegiance to God envisioned as pervasive Spirit, it might be possible, on the Chinese model, to consider oneself as 'belonging' to a variety of the world's religions at once.

FIVE: LOST IN EACH OTHERS ARMS?

There are dangers here, however. At a basic level, such a broad allegiance may seem vague and uncertain, and may leave the way open, as Newbigin warns (in D'Costa, p143), for those with "a confident and vigorous claim to know the truth" to gather up those of no faith, and even claim those whose faith has become diffused. There is also a danger for individuals if they come adrift from their original faith: Watson (in Hooker & Sargant p144) feels that "sufficient stability within one's own faith is a prerequisite for the capacity to launch out into the deep in order to widen one's own understanding and take on board the insights of others without loss of integrity".

Loss of integrity is, in fact, an issue not only for the individual, but also for the dynamic of the whole inter-faith process. As DiNoia points out (in D'Costa p125), if a faith loses its integrity in order to be encompassed within a pluralist theology, then it has *not* actually been 'encompassed' at all, but only modified - in effect, changed into something else. And, of course, as DiNoia observes, the abandonment of claims to universality would amount to such a modification.

On the other hand it is possible that, by maintaining integrity whilst entering into dialogue, a great benefit can be gained not only by the world wide community of believers, but also by the individual faiths, and by individuals within those faiths. Michael Ipgrave, a priest who has served in Japan, speaks of the way in which "The question, 'What is Buddhism?' gradually led in Japan into the question, 'And what is Christianity?'" (p17). If a new light of enquiry is shed on one's own faith by a general encounter with those of another tradition, the same is true when texts are brought together. As Clooney notes (in D'Costa p71) when one reads texts from two different faiths in the context of each other "The tension created ... enhances the meaning of both texts and creates theological possibilities hitherto impossible".

SIX: A LITTLE UNDERSTANDING

Maintaining integrity in dialogue can, however, create its problems. Watson (in Hooker & Sargant p139) identifies an attitude which she calls "critical affirmation" which will "affirm the insights of others but not their oversights or the way in which people may deny the insights of others themselves". In other words, we must not forget that there will be times when disagreements which may be deep will open up. However, zealousness for our integrity must not cause us to jump too hastily to the conclusion that we have detected oversights or worse in our neighbours of other faiths.

Pratt warns (p13), that "Genuine religious debate and dialogue will only rise above an exercise in parallel prejudicial monologue to the extent that there has been a genuine effort at understanding". Much damage can be done by over confidence, not least in perceiving 'oversights' when perhaps there are none. The Bishop of Monmouth, speaking at a conference entitled *Islam ... Friend or Foe?*, spoke of "the challenges and difficulties in inter-faith discussions which come when we think that we understand more than we really do about other faith traditions" (quoted in Garrard p6).

Pratt's 'genuine effort at understanding', has its risks. Thomas Merton saw that it was not enough to approach another religion on one's own terms, but that one had to do so on its own terms (see Shannon p285). Cantwell Smith went further and spoke of looking at the world through the eyes of a member of another faith (1981 p47). It is of course questionable how far the latter is possible; but to follow either Cantwell Smith, or Merton's advice may also have implications for the integrity of one's own faith identity.

SEVEN: GROUNDED

There is an ever present danger in inter-faith dialogue of comparing the idealised theory of one's own faith with the necessarily less than ideal practice of someone else's (see Inter Faith Network p6), or vice versa. In order to avoid this, and also step aside from the difficulties of full theological understanding, one could elect not to take the classic Western European starting point of ideas and beliefs (see Cantwell Smith 1978 p172), but rather to look at what different faith communities actually *do* in their everyday life - on the ground.

As Samartha observes (p167) "People of different cultures and religions are being drawn together for common purposes in the global community as never before"; and this is beginning to be a possibility in local communities too. Of the three 'bridges' described in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Moltmann regarded 'justice' as "the only way towards a meaningful dialogue" (in D'Costa p155). Samartha, correctly, wants to see religious dialogue adding an important dimension to cooperation on justice issues. However, Braybrooke speaks of the World Congress of Faiths working "to uphold *human* values" (in Hooker & Sargant p126, my italics), and there is a danger that a concentration on secular outworkings may neglect faith completely.

However, this divorce does not have to follow. Any consideration of justice by people of faith, naturally lends itself to a consideration of ultimate values (see Suchocki, in Hick & Knitter p160). And if that uncovers areas of disagreement or uncertainty, then perhaps we can echo Farid Esack's words, writing about the liberation of the oppressed: "Let us hope that we will be able to sort out some of the theological issues whilst we walk the road" (quoted Bennett p60).

A SUMMARY OF ISSUES RAISED

* Has God given the experience of religious pluralism to show new things, or to try the faithfulness of believers to the old?

* Is a religion, together with its scriptures and other defining writings, an immutable revelation from God?

* In what ways can one relate to other faiths whilst maintaining integrity in one's own?

* Is it possible to work towards a theology of religious pluralism starting from praxis?

CHAPTER 3
CHRISTIAN VIEWS

In this chapter I shall look at the general issues in inter-faith relations summarised at the end of Chapter 2, using the work of some writers who consider the Christian perspective.

ONE: Has God given the experience of religious pluralism to show new things, or to try the faithfulness of believers to the old?

Traditional Christianity would instinctively tend towards the latter of these positions: its unique claims for Jesus Christ, and the mission to the world which he gave to his followers making it exclusive of the claims of any other faith. However, it is possible to see the sense of superiority which sustains this exclusivism as having a historical rather than divine origin. Ruether (in Hick & Knitter p138) points out that:

> "Christian claims to universalism were shaped culturally within the Greco-Roman Empire, which believed itself to be a universal empire containing the one true humanistic culture".

It could, therefore, be claimed that Christianity took on the aspirations of the pagan emperors; and the politics of 'Christendom' could be seen as perpetuating the influence of this secular rather than divine power.

The link between political and religious imperialism can be traced down to modern times, as Bishop notes (in Hooker & Sargant pp48-9), since "most British missionaries worked within the empire", and this led to an unconscious attitude of superiority. With the collapse of the British Empire, however, it is now possible to look at the experience of Christians, such as those in Pakistan, who are in a weak and even persecuted minority (see Rumalash p8) and ask if superiority is a necessary attribute of a Christian world view. Indeed it is possible to look back to India before the Portugese influence of the 16th century and see that Eastern Christians had a "traditional attitude of accepting every religion as sufficient for the salvation of its adherents" (Thomas, in D'Costa p50).

It may be objected, of course, that if history leads to a sense of Christianity's superior destiny, then it is God who is leading history. However, scripture itself contains hints that it is not through uniformity that God wishes human kind to relate to Him. As Cracknell notes (in Hooker & Sargant p21) the great list of founders detailed in Genesis 10 seems to indicate God's delight in diversity; and in Isaiah 19 (cited ibid p23) two of the nations of God's world, Egypt and Assyria, are seen as equally blessed with Israel - coming to know the Lord without any indication that they must become subject to the covenant with Israel. And in the specifically Christian scriptures, Acts 10:34-5 (cited by Braybrooke, ibid p127) indicates that all nations are acceptable to God provided they fear Him and do what is right - again, with no implication that this must be demonstrated according to any specific practice or teaching.

If it can be shown, above, that tradition (in the form of imperial history) and scripture do not unequivocally support Christian exclusivism, then those other accepted pillars of Christian faith - reason and experience - most certainly do not. It was the experience of being confronted with the reality of other faiths in Birmingham which began John Hick's journey to the pluralist position (see Partridge, *John Hick and the Pluralist Hypothesis*, lecture for The Northern Ordination Course, 8/3/99); and those Christians who, like Pat Hooker (also in Birmingham), have worked with believers of other faiths have felt bound to acknowledge "the work of God outside the Covenant" (Hooker p21). It is the reflection of reason on the experience of holiness and godliness outside the Church which is leading Christianity no longer to see other religions as paths to perdition but rather as possible ways to salvation (see Kung p97).

Reason has gone further, and claimed that God's work through other faiths can be seen as consonant with existing Christian teaching. Cantwell Smith points out (1981 pp171 & 178) that salvation by faith, a God who works in historical and cultural context, and a God of outreach and reconciliation are all Christian themes. And Merton's contention that those of all religions who were of upright conscience might attain union with God on account of his grace (Faricy p147) is in line with Christian teaching on the salvic necessity of Grace. Indeed, Merton saw the Church's very claim

to catholicity as dependent on its recognition of God's work beyond its own institutional boundaries (see Shannon p285).

These approaches to the multi-faith issue attained 'official' recognition in Vatican II and Redemptor Hominis, which affirm Christ's redemption of all people even though the mechanism is known only to God (see Hick, in Hick & Knitter p21). However, this stance - characterised as inclusivist - has attracted some criticism as it appears to make adherents of other faiths into 'anonymous Christians'. Kung called it presumptious and asked, "What would Christians say if they were graciously recognized by Buddhists as 'anonymous Buddhists'?" (p98). And as Knitter points out (in Hick & Knitter p182), it can be seen as yet another form of Christian imperialism. Perhaps most important, however, in terms of our opening question, is Driver's observation (in Hick & Knitter p208) that inclusivism allows other religions to "somehow be politely affirmed in their existence without the need for Christianity to undergo any significant change in itself". Can God show something new if there is no change?

TWO: Is a religion, together with its scriptures and other defining writings, an immutable revelation from God?

As we saw in responding to question **ONE** above, Christological claims and the Christian mission are strong influences on Christianity's attitude to other faiths. Both are seen as embedded in scripture and affirmed by credal statements, and so a Christian response to this second question is clearly important.

One approach to Christological claims is to question their authenticity. For many Christians, modern scholarship has made it possible to see the Gospels as a record of belief rather than exact factual evidence, so that they could agree with Braybrooke in the opinion that "The Christological titles were used by the early Church to communicate their conviction that they had been met by God in Jesus Christ" rather than representing accurately any claims Jesus may have made for himself (in Hooker & Sargant p128).

Another approach is to accept the claims but reassess or reinterpret them. D'Costa (in D'Costa p18) observes that Jesus is called "wholly God, but never the whole of God", which together with Pannikar's view that "No single notion can comprehend the reality of Christ" (in Hick & Knitter p112), can enable Cantwell Smith to ask not whether Jesus was a form of God in history, but rather whether he was one such form among many. This reinterpretative approach is used by Cracknell (in Hooker & Sargant pp24-25) to look again at the mission given to the Church. He claims "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19) should properly be translated as 'disciple the nations', and that this transitive verb means "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (vs20): their obedience then constitutes their baptism (vs19). Approaches such as this clearly allow for a broader view of Christian missionary objectives.

A major work of reinterpretation has been Hick's 'Copernican revolution' - the basis of his pluralist approach - which he states as follows:

> a "Copernican revolution in theology ... involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realization that it is *God* who is at the centre, and all the religions of mankind [sic], including our own, serve and revolve round him"
> (*God and the Universe of Faiths*, p131, quoted in D'Costa p97).

It is possible to view this as a reflection of Christian teaching itself, if one holds, with Samartha (in Hick & Knitter p79) that "Jesus himself was theocentric" and had more to say about the Kingdom of Heaven than about his own claims (see Braybrooke, in Hooker & Sargant p128). However, doubts have been expressed about the efficacy of this attempt to find a uniting centre: since a God-centred model would not answer for Buddhists, Hick substituted a 'Reality-centric' model which, according to Newbigin, amounted to putting a blank in the centre to be filled by our own subjectivity (see D'Costa p142).

We can see from the above that it is possible for Christians to achieve varying degrees of change in the understanding of their faith and even to breach the boundaries which distinguish it from other faiths. We can now examine the degree to which this allows relationships to be developed with adherents of other faiths.

THREE: In what ways can one relate to other faiths whilst maintaining integrity in one's own?

Theocentrism, by almost leaving Jesus 'out on a limb', can enable Christians to 'share Christ' with those of other faiths in a new way, by holding him out to them. As Samartha observes, it "allows for an evolving quest for the meaning of Jesus Christ in which neighbours of other faiths can also participate" (in Hick & Knitter p81). As he goes on to explain (p83) "Although Christianity belongs to Christ, Christ does not belong to Christianity". And perhaps even Christianity does not belong to itself but should be open to the interpretation of the whole world of faiths, so that rather than being seen as the fulfilment of other religions it can itself be fulfilled (see D'Costa p26). As D'Costa points out (ibid p23), Jesus is recorded as telling his disciples (Jn16:12) "I still have many things to say to you", and perhaps some of these things will be said from beyond the limits of Christianity.

The incorporation of influences from outside Christianity is not, of course, a new phenomenon. Thomas Merton recalls in *The Catholic World* the contribution which Greek philosophy and Roman law made to Christian culture, and goes on to ask if a similar use of oriental philosophy might be able to lead to a deeper and wiser understanding of the Christian mystical tradition with which he was so much concerned (see McDonnell pp302-3). Even the use of other scriptures is not new. As Selvanayagam notes (*Christian Scriptures in the Midst of Many Scriptures - A Dialogical Approach*, lecture for Hartley Victoria College, 13/11/98) the New Testament is in dialogue with the Old (which itself has been shown to relate to other scriptures in the surrounding cultures); and, as he goes on to suggest, new dialogues - for instance between the 'I am' sayings of Jesus and of Krishna may throw light on both scriptures.

It is important to note from this last point that a relationship with other faiths is a 'dialogue' - a two way process. It is sometimes supposed by Christians that opening their faith to the world of other religions is going to entail change for Christians only. However, Thomas (in D'Costa

pp53-4) speaks of "the creative encounter with the person of Jesus and the meaning of the cross by the Neo-Hindu movements" in India, and the effect which Christianity has had on India's search for "fundamental rights of personhood". As Kung puts it (p100) "The challenge of the world religions must be understood both actively and passively. For the world religions themselves are also challenged".

The question of integrity is vital to this two way dialogue: the experience of those who, like the Bishop of Bradford, have been involved in inter-faith dialogue is that rather than threatening integrity, dialogue *depends* upon it. Speaking at 'Lambeth 98', the Bishop described the great bonds between "Christians with a strong faith and Muslims with a strong faith. If Muslims in Bradford feel that you care little about your religion, they simply don't want to know" (Paflin & Handley p4). Not only will Christians be unable to give from their faith unless they maintain their integrity within it, but they will not be able to receive: as Shannon records, it was only Merton's rootedness in the Christian mystic tradition which allowed him to grasp something of the wisdom of the East (p281).

Integrity does, however, impose limits to union with those of other faiths. When picturing different approaches to inter-faith encounter, Cooling (*RE and the Moral Debate*, lecture for Oldham LEA, 17/11/94) uses a biological analogy. He contrasts primitive aquatic organisms which lack the ability to reject, and therefore take in so much of the surrounding fluid of a pond that they eventually disintegrate, with the amoeba which has the power either to take items from its surroundings and make use of them, or reject them as unsuitable.

For many Christians involved with believers of other faiths, the point of rejection is joint worship. However, as Bookless points out, "There is much we can celebrate together as fellow human beings (eg marriage) without engaging in worship together" (p7). He goes on to suggest that "Both theologically and pastorally, private prayer with individuals is more acceptable than public worship" (p22).

FOUR: Is it possible to work towards a theology of religious pluralism starting from praxis?

Bookless points out (p8) that Proverbs 14:31 suggests "an act of generosity shown to the poor can be worship", and the 'prayer' of shared social action is perhaps one way that believers of different faiths may successfully unite. The declaration of the 1970 'World Conference of the Religions for Peace' - "a world ethic of the world religions in the service of world society" - attracting the support of all the major world faiths, and others, may be seen as evidence of this (Kung, *Global Responsibility* SCM 1991, p63, quoted by Cooling, *RE and the Moral Debate*, lecture for Oldham LEA, 17/11/94).

As Knitter observes (in Hick & Knitter p196) "The power and purpose of biblical language is first of all to call forth a way of life rather than a body of belief", and so in acting out Kingdom values in society, Christians can maintain the integrity of their faith whilst participating fully with believers of other faiths. Hooker (pp10-11) gives examples of specific actions, such as providing advice on housing issues, which demonstrate practical love in a multi-faith neighbourhood - perhaps a more positive response to the command 'Love your neighbour as yourself' than taking issue with your neighbour over matters of theology: and possibly a more powerful witness for the Christian faith.

If it is necessary to balance the Great Commission to disciple the world (Mt 28:19) with the Great Commandment to love (Mk 12:31) (see Bookless p12); it is also possible to see the 'Commission' as being achieved *through* the 'Commandment': Knitter (quoted Bennett p58) calls himself "still a missionary" but sees his mission to the world as a mission "to fashion the Kingdom of peace and justice".

CHAPTER 4
SIKH VIEWS

This chapter uses the writing of Sikhs and those who work closely with them to examine Sikh perspectives on the general issues emerging from Chapter 2.

ONE: Has God given the experience of religious pluralism to show new things, or to try the faithfulness of believers to the old?

Indarjit Singh (1986 p23) clearly states the view that pluralism is a gift for our times:

> "Religions have too long been compartmentalised and thus their influence marginalized. The random coming together of different faiths in the late 20th century, viewed with concern by many, could well provide the moral direction so missing in political thinking and social behaviour in the society of today".

This positive attitude should come as no surprise bearing in mind the history of Sikhism, which is, as Indarjit Singh points out (ibid p21), "a religion founded in interfaith dialogue".

'Dialogue' can, of course, be a euphemism for proselytism, but "Sikhism is not a missionary faith; its mission is to proclaim the truth but not to seek converts. Where there are missionary societies their aim is to call Sikhs back to their faith" (Cole & Sambhi 1978 p57). As far as members of the other faiths are concerned (specifically Hindus and Muslims, in the environment in which Sikhism developed), the Sikh attitude is that of their founder, Guru Nanak, and the Gurus who followed him: that they should see beyond ritualism and formalism to underlying spiritual truth (ibid pp147-8).

To do this, it is quite possible to remain within one's own faith, and this would be the advice of Sikhism (ibid p151). Indeed, Indarjit Singh (1986 p22) regards it as a basic teaching of Sikhism "that different religions can be sincere and viable alternatives." And Cole & Sambhi (1993 p195) suggest that Guru Nanak's wish for Muslims and Hindus was not that they should become Sikhs, but that they should become better Muslims and Hindus. Guru Amar Das (AG 853) puts it thus: "O Lord, out of your mercy save this burning world, and save it through whichever way it can be saved" (quoted in Cole & Sambhi 1978 p150).

Sikhs can therefore be expected to embrace contemporary religious diversity, and to do so in a positive, pluralistic way. Their only reservation might be that since openness can be seen as a Sikh article of faith, expressed in scripture, it does lead them to oppose any exclusive claims made by other religions (ibid).

TWO: Is a religion, together with its scriptures and other defining writings, an immutable revelation from God?

Even though there is a tendency for Sikhs to look to the *experience* of God rather than logical argument (see David p33), to regard revelation as an ongoing process (see Cole & Sambhi 1993 p200), and to accept that the word of God can issue from living people as well as scripture (see Cole & Sambhi 1978 p52), scripture and the teachings derived from it still play a major role in their faith. Indeed, the book of scripture - The Guru Granth Sahib - is literally central to worship, and shares with the community the role of living Guru. As Hooker points out (pp17-18), the acceptance of authority is an important aspect of Sikh life in the family, and this attitude extends to scripture. Indeed, the 7th Guru disowned his 14 year old son for trying to make the Guru Granth Sahib more acceptable to Muslims by suggesting a particular word was a scribal error (see Cole & Sambhi 1978 p32).

Sandeep Singh Brar (*Home Page: Introduction* p1) gives first place in the list of Sikh Philosophy and Beliefs to the statement "There is only One God. He is the same God for people of all religions". A promising statement of unity. However this 'sameness' can prove problematic when Sikh teachings are brought into dialogue with those of Christians regarding the incarnation. Sikhism firmly denies the possibility of incarnation - an issue which was present from the faith's inception in the form of the Hindu doctrine of avatars (see Cole & Sambhi 1993 p51) - and the point is made explicit by Guru Arjan in the Guru Granth Sahib: "May the mouth burn by which it is said that the Lord becomes incarnate. He neither comes nor departs from this world" (AG1136, quoted by David p31).

McLeod explains one Sikh objection as follows: "To be incarnated means to be involved in death, which is the supreme enemy, the characteristic quality of the unstable world and the ultimate antithesis of God's eternal being" (p171). And Sandeep Singh Brar (*Home Page: Sikhism & Other Religions* p2) points out that the idea of Jesus as exclusive 'son of God' runs counter to the Sikh view that all are God's children. For Guru Nanak, God's revelation of himself is in his creation (see McLeod p6): the subsequent Sikh understanding of creation as an emanation from God blurs the Christian distinction of the Creator from the creation, and thus produces another difference in view even on the seemingly unifying concept of a 'Creator God' (see David p34).

Second in Sandeep Singh Brar's list of Sikh Philosophy and Beliefs (Home Page: Introduction p1) is an explanation of the cycle of births and deaths - *Samsara*. Although this too appears inclusive since it teaches that "The goal of our life is to lead an exemplary existence so that one may merge with God" (ibid) - in other words, salvation is not dependent on belief in a particular doctrine - yet it can cause difficulties in dialogue with those who hold a different view. Whilst Christians would look to doctrines of sin and redemption, a Sikh would attribute human failure to live as God

would have us do to the delusion (*maya*) which places a wrong value on material things, and to self reliance (*haumai*) (see Cole & Sambhi 1978 p77). For a Sikh, sins can be cleansed by meditation and prayer, but do not require atonement (see David p35); indeed Cole & Sambhi point out (1993 p59) that vicarious suffering is not a concept to be found in the Indian tradition.

It can be seen, then, that Sikh teachings, often laid down in scripture, although appearing quite broad, can by their very breadth deny understandings such as those of Christianity which have more particular emphases on certain points. As has been stated above, continuing revelation, and contemporary experience have their place in Sikhism: it remains to be asked whether scripture and traditional doctrines can respond to these modifying influences. As Cole & Sambhi point out (1993 pp105-110), a critical/analytical approach to scripture has not found favour with Sikh's, since the text of the Guru Granth Sahib is not an issue, and its reading is regarded as a devotional rather than analytical matter; and McLeod's textual analytical approach to the *janam sakhis* (accounts of the life of Guru Nanak) was criticised as a 'western' approach which did not appreciate the purpose of the *sakhis*.

It is possible, however, to find evidence of a willingness to use interpretation in addressing contemporary matters (see Cole & Sambhi 1993 p103); and to enable understandings from seemingly opposed doctrinal standpoints to come closer together. As David points out (p34), the Sikh view of the unity of God will not, on the face of it, admit of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, there is a tendency for Sikhs to group Christianity with Hinduism in this regard (see Cole & Sambhi 1993 p8). However, Prof. Gopal Singh Puri, (p33) notes that Sikhs are able to see that Hindus and Muslims are addressing the same God but by different names (with the warrant of AG64, in which Guru Nanak uses Muslim names for God Cole & Sambhi, would add (1978 p70)), and they are therefore enabled to come to an understanding of God expressed as Trinity.

THREE: In what ways can one relate to other faiths whilst maintaining integrity in one's own?

The openness of Sikhism, outlined in ONE above, could be seen as quite passive. However, Sikh history shows a much more active concern for believers of other faiths. Guru Hargobind paid for the building of a mosque and a Hindu Temple (Cole & Sambhi 1978 p148), as well as rescuing 52 Hindu princes who had been imprisoned with him (ibid p131). The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur at the hands of a Muslim emperor during a period of forced Islamisation was seen as a death on behalf of Hindus and religious freedom in general as well as for the Sikhs (ibid p34). And Maharaja Ranjit Singh employed Muslims in the positions of chief minister, police administrator, and personal physician, whilst his palace chamberlain was a Hindu (ibid p153).

This reaching out to other faiths can be seen in the way that the Guru Granth Sahib was compiled. Not only does the Sikh scripture contain writings by non-Sikhs, but it also contains them in considerable numbers, their total amounting to a greater contribution than that made by any single Guru apart from Guru Arjan (see Cole & Sambhi 1978 p53). Cole & Sambhi suggest that the inclusion of this material may have been a conscious attempt to assert the catholicity of Sikhism (ibid p52). Whether or not that is so, the catholic content of the Guru Granth Sahib is, as Cole & Sambhi express it (1993 p98):

> "a constant reminder that God's revelation is inclusive, not exclusive. God has spoken through the Gurus; the Sikh scripture is the word of God, but most Sikhs would say that so too are the Vedas, the Qur'an and the Bible".

Whilst reaching out to other faiths, however, it has always been important for Sikhs to maintain their own identity. In describing those contributions from other faiths which are included in the Guru Granth Sahib, Sandeep Singh Brar characterises them as writings "whose thoughts were consistent with those of the Sikh Gurus" (*Home Page: Introduction* p2), and so it can be seen that the inclusiveness is not uncritical. Guru Nanak may have wished to reconcile adherents of the two faiths amongst which he grew up - but not through syncretism (see McLeod p161). McLeod thinks Guru Nanak

regarded Hindu and Muslim beliefs as wrong, whilst Cole & Sambhi (1978 p40) are of the opinion that he saw them as being distracting: certainly he did not wish his followers to accept them indiscriminately.

As Hooker notes in a contemporary setting (p7), Sikh receptivity to other religions can lead to insecurity when confronted with more dogmatic faiths; and historically, the foundation of the Khalsa in 1699, with the wearing of the '5 Ks', showed a determination to assert Sikhism's identity after a century marked by conflict with Islam. Indarjit Singh (1986 p21) speaks of "a history of unrelenting persecution", and sees this as perhaps responsible for a "preoccupation with self preservation as a distinct social group in a closed community". In the period following the British annexation of the Punjab in 1849, McLeod notes (p3) another threat - that of absorption into Hinduism. At the end of the 19th century, the Singh Sabha Movement began reforms leading to religious revival in the political context of colonial India (ibid). Today the Sikh code of conduct - the Rehat Maryada - is clear on the issues of integrity with regard to scriptures, observances, and membership of other faiths (see Cole & Sambhi 1978 pp168-179); and Khalsa Sikhs, who follow this code, have an important role in modern Sikhism. The need to preserve a distinct identity can therefore be seen as a longstanding concern for Sikhs.

FOUR: Is it possible to work towards a theology of religious pluralism starting from praxis?

> "Of what use is your spirituality," asks Indarjit Singh, "your deeper understanding, your wiser and wider perspectives if not used to help your fellowmen [sic] in (the) search for a more socially just and more peaceful society" (1985/1986 p29).

He further reminds us (1986 p23): "The Gurus criticised those that left their social responsibilities in the pursuit of spiritual improvement". Service (*sewa*) is foundational to the Sikh understanding of a life of faith - Guru Nanak himself washed feet in the manner of a servant (see Cole & Sambhi 1978 p100), and is said to have chosen his successor on the basis of his willingness to perform a humble duty (see ibid p18). An enthusiastic response can therefore be expected from Sikhs to the suggestion that they should join forces with other faiths on issues of social justice.

Cole & Sambhi, (1993 p169) record the denunciation by The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee of enforced vasectomy as part of the Indian government's birth control policy; and it is perhaps in new ethical issues, where *no* scripture gives a clear lead, that cooperation between faiths could be most helpful (see Cole & Sambhi 1993 p190). However, it is not only in witness to the surrounding community that Sikhs and other faiths could combine. There is also work to be done in addressing internal ethical practice, as opposed to theory. The possibilites for inter-faith relationship explored in TWO above could lead to theological enrichment - for instance, looking at the nature of Christ and the nature of Gurushiр (see Webster p11) - but the Gurus who warned against neglecting the social in favour of the spiritual might well expect a grappling with ethical issues as well.

Cole & Sambhi (1993 p187) claim that "Caste and the treatment of women, racism and the status of women in ministry are the Achilles' heel of (Sikhism and Christianity)". Inter-faith dialogue on these issues could be every bit as enriching as dialogue on more abstract matters, and every bit as important to two faiths which hold justice so dear. 'Thy Kingdom come' pray Christians, in the words their Saviour taught them; 'May the kingdom of justice come' pray Sikhs, in the Ardas which concludes their worship (see Cole & Sambhi 1993 p49).

CHAPTER 5
VIEWS FROM A CHURCH

This chapter explores the issues raised by inter-faith relations as seen at St Thomas's Church.

ONE: THE 'OFFICIAL LINE'

As a Church of England parish forms part of an institution with a chain of influence and authority, it is relevant to consider, briefly, the issues as seen by those who form key links in the chain leading to St Thomas's.

The Lambeth Conference is a significant indicator of views in the world wide Anglican Communion, and in 1988 and 1998 interfaith cooperation on issues of peace and justice was an important theme (see Bunting p234, Paflin & Handley p4, and Rumalshah p8). However, the 1988 Resolution 20 stated that dialogue was "not a substitute for evangelism" (quoted Bunting p234); and in 1998 the Archbishop of Canterbury made clear that cooperation with other faiths should not blunt the calling to be "unapologetic about the claims of Christ" (see Carey p25).

St Thomas's Church is within the Diocese of Wakefield, and the Diocesan Bishop, Nigel McCulloch, has written on inter-faith matters in his book *Barriers to Belief* (qv pp49-60). Here he speaks of the potential gains from mutual understanding and cooperation in terms of spirituality, ethics, education, community relations, and work with youth (p50). However, he rejects pluralism (p56) and whilst not wishing to say the other faiths are 'wrong' sees Christianity as completing them, and offering the only way to see God as he really is (p49), thus advocating an inclusivist fulfilment model. It is preferable, he says, to begin with *people* of other faiths, rather than with faiths in themselves (p57)

In an interview for this dissertation, Canon Bill Jones, Bishop Nigel's Adviser for Inter-faith Matters, outlined the practicalities of inter-faith relations in the diocese. He was convinced that God had a purpose in bringing the faiths into contact at this time, but it was not to affect wholesale conversion to Christianity: his experience of working with people of other faiths had taught him that it was impossible to believe they had no access to their maker; and that to convert them was no more an option than for them to convert him. He saw value in dialogue about beliefs, to remove misunderstandings and stereotypes and to widen knowledge, but saw it as limited by the inevitability of irresolvable disagreement.

There was more to be gained in joint action on social issues, Canon Jones suggested - particularly in conjunction with secular agencies, who were now being obliged to consider the spiritual dimension as part of their remit of concern for 'ethnic minorities'. It was in intercessory prayer on social issues that the faiths could come together rather than in acts of worship: in the latter case it was more valid for the faiths to be guests at each others formal worship, rather than participants in it.

Canon Richard Giles, the outgoing incumbent of St Thomas's, in his book *We Do Not Presume* (qv pp112-120), speaks of his approach to other faiths. He sees the possibility of cooperation primarily on a spiritual plane - an "alliance for God" against materialism (p120). His general approach has been shaped by the experience of living in a multi-faith neighbourhood (p117); and he now sees an encounter with a God who is too big for our concepts as more important than labels (p112). However, whilst willing to accept some 'shortcuts' from travellers of other faiths, he still wants to claim for Christianity the supreme and most straightforward route to God (p118).

In February 1999 a member of the Sikh community came to speak to a Monthly Meeting at St Thomas's about her faith. She also worshipped and took communion with the congregation. In introducing the talk, Canon Giles asked the congregation, whilst proclaiming Christ as their gateway, to honour others who have different names for the gateway to God; and to understand communion as representing God's feast for all who earnestly seek him.

TWO: 'CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSES'

I interviewed 8 congregation members - representing a range of ages from 30s to 70s, both genders, and the white and Afro-caribbean membership of St Thomas's congregation - asking them for their responses to the visit of the Sikh representative, and to inter-faith relations generally.

Although respondent 1 said he expected there would be a variety of responses to this issue amongst the congregation, none of the sample took up an exclusivist position. Inclusivist, and pluralist views were expressed, and there was a general sense of the need to respect those of other faiths. Respondent 7 went so far as to say that members of other faiths should not be put on the defensive and made to justify their faith since she, personally, did not take kindly to being treated this way as a Christian by those who wished to attack her faith.

Respondent 4 said she was enthused by encountering others who were enthusiastic about their faith, whatever that faith might be. And the sense of kinship with Sikhs as people of faith was made explicit by most respondents, who indicated that they valued people for their faithfulness in their search for God as fellow pilgrims, rather than for the precise articles of faith they professed.

Respondents 2 and 3 expressed the view that the variety of faiths was not unlike an extension of the varieties of denominations within Christianity. Respondent 2 actually used the term 'nominations' to refer to the different faiths. Respondent 3 spoke of the importance of feeling 'comfortable' in your faith, seeing this as a criterion for its validity. And respondents 5 and 6 felt that the barriers which separated us in religious matters were human constructs rather than of God. There was more of a willingness to see similarities than differences - influenced, perhaps, by experience as a multi-cultural congregation, and a desire to display welcome, as well as to respond positively to this project. Respondent 5 observed that Sikhs, like Christians, were 'people of a book'; and respondent 8 pointed to the example of a bishop who had espoused a limited form of the Sikh doctrine of reincarnation.

Bishop Nigel (McCulloch p57) was mindful of the biblical injunction not to judge, and there was no discernible wish amongst my sample to judge the other faiths. Respondent 2 claimed that it was up to the individual to find out by experience whether their faith amounted to a 'wrong road' on the journey to God. He went so far as to say that noone had the right to tell someone else their religion was wrong. In fact he thought it was unchristian to do so. This view was echoed by respondent 8 who felt that to dismiss other faiths was to dismiss 'half the world', which was an unchristian thing to do. He didn't like to think of people being excluded from salvation.

There was an appreciation of the visit as a human gesture: respondent 4 said that she valued the warmth of the speaker towards the Christian community in wanting to come and speak there, and noted the language barrier she had had to cope with. In general, the spirit of the encounter seemed more important than the details. Respondent 7 remembered the way some senior figures from the Shri Guru Nanak Gurdwara had attended the rededication of St Thomas's in 1990, and said she had been impressed by that. Three respondents mentioned hospitality as one area in which they thought the two communities could relate.

Although respondent 7 said she was not sure what the communities could achieve together beyond hospitality, respondent 4 said she was pleased the visit had taken place in the context of an act of worship, and cited worship, together with charitable work, as possible areas of relationship. In terms of the Sikh visitor sharing communion, there was no adverse comment, respondent 4 observing that Jesus did not turn anyone away. Although respondent 7 did ask how welcoming a Sikh related to the internal policy of declining communion to unconfirmed Christians.

In general terms there was a sense that variety was good, respondent 8 seeing it in the context of the variety of Creation and likening it to the attractive ethnic variety of the congregation at St Thomas's. Interest was expressed in learning about Sikh practices, and several respondents already knew a little either through their profession as teachers, through friends at work, or through having visited the Gurdwara on a trip arranged in the past from St Thomas's. There was clearly some confusion, however, over such matters as the distinction between Indian ethnic groups and faiths, and the proper vocabulary for and significance of various practices and artefacts.

CHAPTER 6
VIEWS FROM A GURDWARA

This chapter explores the issues raised by inter-faith relations as seen at the Shri Guru Nanak Gurdwara.

ONE: THE 'OFFICIAL LINE'

The Punjab, and within the Punjab, the Golden Temple in Amritsar form the focal point of religious and political significance for Sikhs. However, the leadership from Amritsar does not seek to impose an institutional structure on world Sikhism. As Indarjit Singh points out (BBC 1999):

> "The leadership of the Sikh community in Amritsar has no direct responsibility or authority to tell Sikhs outside the country of how they should interpret their religion or how they should live their religion."

Nonetheless, as Indarjit Singh goes on to note (ibid), Sikhs do look to Amritsar as a spiritual home and source of guidance. James (*Sikh Children in Britain*, OUP 1974, see Hanson's review p7) noted the strong link between Sikh families in Britain in the 1960s and the Punjab. However, my respondent B referred to young British-born Sikhs today losing the sense of the Eastern tradition which he enjoys. The link with Amritsar may, therefore, become weakened.

Respondent B acknowledged the ultimate authority of any edict (*hukam nama*) from Amritsar for a Khalsa Sikh, although none of the respondents I asked was aware of any such edict regarding inter-faith matters. Respondents B and C felt that edicts tended to be on internal concerns; whilst respondents D and E said that they would not expect an edict on inter-faith relations since teaching was already clear on this subject. Several respondents articulated this teaching as promoting a non-condemnatory approach to other faiths.

Respondents D and E, both Khalsa Sikhs, claimed that Khalsa rules did not cover the inter-faith area. However the Rahit (or Rehat) Maryada, referred to as "the Khalsa Code of Discipline" (Cole p4) or "a guide to the Sikh way of life (Cole & Sambhi 1978 p168), does have references to the issue. Writing of the Rahit Maryada, Cole states (p4):

> "It details how Khalsa members should live. Its impact upon other Sikhs varies but few would appear to ignore it completely and its influence upon gurdwara affairs is considerable."

Any statement it makes about relations between the faiths is clearly, therefore, of importance in establishing an 'official line'.

The Rahit Maryada indicates that the gurdwara must be open to all, irrespective of creed, and that there should be no distinction in the congregation between Sikh and non-Sikh (Cole & Sambhi 1978 p171). Furthermore, it acknowledges the worth of non-Sikh scriptures: "The Vedas, shastras, Gayatri Mantra, Bhagavad Gita, Qur'an and Bible may be read with profit and should be respected" (ibid p175). However, it goes on to make clear that "Faith should be based on the Sikh scriptures" (ibid). The tenets of Sikhism are clearly the touchstone of acceptablity, and it is stated (ibid p174) that no lecture which contradicts them may be given in the gurdwara. There are also prohibitions on ceremonial and ritual practices associated with other faiths (ibid pp170, 176 and 177), and it is stipulated that a Sikh "must not adhere to any other religion" (ibid p169). Openness is, therefore, tempered with a manifest concern for integrity.

Within the Shri Guru Nanak Gurdwara itself, none of the respondents whom I asked could identify a formal structure through which they would seek guidance on matters of faith, the Committee and its Officers being seen as administrative in function. Respondents D and E cited this as an area of need and hoped that an advisory forum could be developed in the future. Respondent B pointed to the interpretation of scripture as a matter for scholars, and several respondents referred to one individual - Sardar Arjan Kirpal Singh - as a scholar whose views were much regarded in the local community, since Amritsar had granted him the title 'Professor of Sikhism'.

In his public address to mark the 300th anniversary of the Khalsa, (*The Sikh 'Vaisakhi'*, 21/4/99) Sardar Arjan Kirpal Singh stressed that the Sikh Gurus "helped everybody regardless of religion" and that the Khalsa "served humanity without any discrimination". He concluded with a universal blessing, and the wish that humanity might be granted the "spirit of tolerance and contentment, which are vitally essential for civic harmony" thus emphasising Sikhs' concern for positive religious and social relationships and their view of themselves as called to the promotion of both.

The Sikh community have no paid official equivalent to the Bishop's Advisor for Inter-faith matters, but they do have a representative on the area Inter-faith Council. In an interview for this project their representative, Ranjit Singh Gill, identified the main benefits of this inter-faith initiative as the opportunities it gave for forming good friendships, and learning about each other's faiths. He saw ignorance as the main reason for offence being caused between faith communities.

He had publicised inter-faith events within the Sikh community and had experienced varying degrees of enthusiasm. He cited language difficulties as a major consideration for those Sikhs who were less enthusiastic. With regard to inter-faith worship, he considered visits to each other's services, rather than any attempt to worship together as the proper way forward. Joint social action was another possible area of cooperation, although he felt that there might be a difficulty in the formal organisation of such work since for Sikhs service was not seen as separate from the regular religious activity of the Gurdwara.

TWO: 'CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSES'

I interviewed 9 congregation (*sangat*) members, representing a range of ages from 30s to 60s, both genders, and Khalsa and non-Khalsa Sikhs. They were asked for their general responses to the issue of Sikh-Christian relations.

The respondents were clearly pleased to have the opportunity of presenting their faith, and the emphasis was therefore on positive aspects - perhaps, also, as a contrast to negative western perceptions of Islam and Hinduism. In this context, a marked feature of all the interviews was a will to look for similarities rather than differences between Sikhism and Christianity. Almost all the respondents mentioned belief in or worship of the one God as the key unifying factor. Respondent D saw the same basics in all faiths, and respondent G regarded those things which separated the faiths as "outside things", in other words inessential or not of God. Respondent H wanted to take basic human values rather than religious doctrines as a starting point and felt that this would reveal our inherent unity.

Respondents F and I quoted Jesus's commandment to "Love God", as equivalent to the Sikh devotion to God, and there was widespread interest in Christian scripture and belief. Respondents A and E made specific enquiries about particular points during the interviews; respondent D described the way he always read Gideon Bibles in hotels; respondent F explained her interest in Christian hymns and symbolism at the school in which she taught; respondents D and E said they watched TV programmes about Christianity; and respondent A gave details of her visits to churches. Respondent B translated 'Sikh' as 'scholar' and said he would listen to good sense wherever it came from. As all the respondents were in daily contact with English cultural life, and all had a good command of English, it was clearly easier for them to be scholars of Christianity than for Christians to be scholars of Sikhism: respondent F pointed to the difficulty of Christians singing hymns in Punjabi.

Respondent D quoted another Christian injunction: "Love your neighbour as yourself"; and three respondents saw service to the community, and charitable work as points of contact and possible avenues for cooperation between the two faiths. Respondent A saw the two faiths as having the same rules for living, and respondents F and H pointed to common values. Respondent B saw good citizenship as essential to Sikhism, which was more about action than formalities. Respondent H said that Sikhs don't stand aloof from the community and pointed to the number of teachers (3) in my sample; (another member of the sample group is a JP). There was a general sense that the two faiths were unified in their common social concern. Four respondents also mentioned a concern for spiritual values in society as something the two faiths shared.

A further common feature of the interviews was a conviction that respect for and tolerance of other faiths was an essential part of Sikhism. Respondents D and E spoke enthusiastically of examples from Sikh history in which Muslims had played a significant part; and respondent B saw Sikh avoidance of beef as originating from consideration for Hindu neighbours in India, for whom the cow is sacred. Respondent D pointed out that Sikhism was not a missionary faith; and respondent E noted that the great Sikh leader Ranjit Singh could have achieved mass 'conversions' to Sikhism by force of arms, but did not do so. Respondents D and G used the image of different paths to the same goal to explain the Sikh view of the diversity of faiths, whilst respondent F saw the faiths as different ways of knowing the same God. Respondents F and G saw belief in a single God as entailing a non-discriminatory approach to all faiths since the one God necessarily unites them. Three respondents described the Sikh message to Christians as "be a good Christian".

In considering the potentially exclusive saying of Jesus "I am the way" (Jn 14:6), respondent E said that Jesus was the way for Christians. In dealing with differences between faiths, most respondents explained that Sikhs do not criticise: respondents G and I explained that if Sikhs see something in another faith with which they disagree, then they leave the members of the other faith to deal with it, or not, as they see fit. Respondent B said that there were some things in Christianity with which he would disagree,

but then again there were things in Sikhism with which he would disagree too. He went on to say that we all fall short of our ideals (a point made with regard to Sikhism by 4 other respondents) and that there was good and bad in all religions: as far as he was concerned, he wanted to look for the good in Christianity rather than the bad.

When considering relating to Christians, respondents B and C pointed to cultural differences as the only possible difficulty, giving the example of jumble sales as something with which Sikhs might feel uncomfortable. In speaking of different approaches to marriage, respondent B wondered whether this was not more a cultural than religious matter. Respondent G hinted at a way forward in this area by describing a Sikh musical event at Leeds Playhouse in which she had taken part - a chance to share a culture-based approach to something which is universal. The only clearly religious matters cited as sensitive areas in Christians/Sikh relations were the prohibition on alcohol and other drugs (mentioned by four respondents), and the dress code when attending the gurdwara (mentioned by respondent F).

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSIONS

To inform my conclusions, I identified seven areas for discussion, drawn from the preceding chapters, and convened two separate groups to consider them - one comprising five members of the Christian community at St Thomas's, and the other five members of the Sikh community at the Shri Guru Nanak Gurdwara. (These groups were largely made up of those who had contributed to chapters 5 and 6, above. Where this was the case, respondents are designated by the same numbers (for Christians) or letters (for Sikhs) used in the earlier chapters). This final chapter is structured around the seven areas which the groups discussed.

ONE: THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

Both Sikhism and Christianity give significant 'power to the people': Christianity in designating the gathering of Christ's people in the Church 'The Body of Christ' (eg Ephesians 1:22-23); and Sikhism in recognising the *panth* (community) a having a share in the authority of Guru. The discussion groups were asked to consider the extent to which they felt they had authority, particularly in the new area of inter-faith relations.

The Sikh respondents gave more weight than the Christians to the restraining effect of scripture when considering this question, respondent J maintaining that it contained everything which one needed to know, and respondent H pointing to the unquestioning obedience demanded of a Sikh. This approach echoes Wright's objection to the Church of England's Inter-Faith Consultative Group (IFCG) Report when it identified Christian humility with an absence of superiority claims for the faith. Wright points out (p242) that "humility is likely to be better served by those who accept the truth of the biblical revelation ... as something given, an objective deposit of which they are merely stewards".

Respondent H pointed out that Sikhs did not see themselves as teachers: they had no authority to change their code but only to learn better how to deal with the demands it laid upon them. He did, however, go on to say that interpretation of scripture was possible; and respondent F added that they tended to look to the *granthi* for interpretation. The Christians also looked to an 'authority figure' in the priest, and respondent 5 considered that lay people saw themselves as inadequately trained to exercise authority. Respondent 9, however, felt that Christians had leaned too heavily on the ordained ministry, undervaluing the authority of their own experience; she pointed to the Christian belief in a 'priesthood of all believers' (1 Peter 2:9) and her relationship with Christ as sources of authority.

It seemed clear that if both communities wished to exercise humility in the face of each other's traditions (see chapters 5 and 6 above), they also wished to exercise it - as Wright would have Christians do - in face of the teachings of their own, either through scripture, recognised leadership, or a personal relationship with their faith. No group felt free simply to make up a new set of rules on their own authority to fit a new situation.

TWO: GOD'S PURPOSE

Wright (p239) states that "all human life has its dark side of alienation from God" and implies that faiths other than Christianity, whilst partaking of the commonality of "all human life", yet suffer this "alienation from God". Langley, on the other hand, (p8) sees *culture* as a source of humanity's alienation - not from God but from itself. Taking the positive approach evinced in chapters 5 and 6 above, it could be suggested that God's purpose in the current inter-faith situation is to help humanity work on this internal cultural alienation.

Certainly, the Sikh group saw the phenomenon of religious diversity as signifying nothing more than the reality of a humanity spread across the globe in many cultures. Respondent J said that when guidance was needed in different times and places, a prophet arose; and respondent E pointed out that one individual could not be everywhere. Respondent H emphasised that

following God, not a particular faith, was the important issue. For the Christian group, respondent 5, too, saw religious diversity as representing the awareness of faith growing in different cultural contexts.

Drawing a parallel with the way in which people turn to God in times of trouble, respondent E wondered if God was not bringing the faiths together at this time because the world was in trouble. Respondent 9 felt that communities of faith themselves were 'in trouble', being minorities in many countries, and were perhaps being brought together to support each other. She also pointed out that faiths tended to abuse power, and that current religious diversity, by denying ultimate dominance to any one faith, helped curb this tendency.

THREE: THE CULTURAL AND THE ESSENTIAL

The IFCG report (quoted Wright p236) speaks of "being prepared to let go of much of the cultural packaging of the Gospel". It could be suggested that one of God's purposes in bringing together different faiths might be to enable believers to look at humanity's relationship with God through the eyes of another tradition. They are thereby encouraged to disentangle the 'medium' from the 'message', and recognise that the message must be 'reincarnated' constantly in the cultural medium of each age and place. As respondent 9 pointed out, there is a 'culture clash' between young and old even within the Christian community at this time - and the same is becoming increasingly true for Sikhs, particularly regarding language.

Respondent 5 identified most of what Christians actually *do* in worship as not fundamentally part of the belief. And respondent H conceded that for Sikhs things had crept into their practice over time which they should not do. Perhaps, however, the point is not to stop doing these things, but to be clear on their subordinate status - as respondent F put it, to be always questioning what one does and not to act blindly.

The alternative is to make points of conflict out of non-essentials; and respondent 8 described the way in which this had caused problems in the past even within a single faith community when Anglo-Catholic priests had been punished for the practices they were promoting. To defend mere practices in such a way is to worship a religious *system* which, as Lamb reminds us with regard to Christianity (p260), is ultimately "a human construct": to worship the human-made is idolatry - something abhorrent to both Christian and Sikh.

Essentials which both Sikhs and Christians could share would be: monotheism; hearing God's voice through scripture; devotion to God's name; and the importance of grace.

FOUR: MISSION AND FULFILMENT

For respondent 10, one of God's purposes in inter-faith relationships was to help believers affirm their understanding of their own faith through explaining it to others. In this respect mission in the context of inter-faith relations could be seen as a mutual relationship - each faith moving to greater fulfilment of itself through interaction with the others, rather than one faith seeing itself as the fulfilment of all others - the position taken by Bishop Nigel (see p30 above).

Respondent 9 identified Jesus as God, his resurrection, and his unique incarnation, as essential to her Christian belief: to regard Jesus as only a prophet was, for her, to leave Christianity. However, when Wright states (p242) that "the fulfilment of God's promise to the Gentiles through Abraham is now available precisely through the unique person and work of Jesus" we have to ask what is meant by "through" - is it possible to give to another faith "through" Jesus, perhaps as Logos, without making exclusive claims? Certainly, respondent H was enthusiastic about Sikhs receiving the insights of other faiths to help them focus better on God. And respondent F pointed to the inclusion of scripture from other faiths in the Guru Granth Sahib as an example of the way Sikhs use the successes of other faiths.

And is it possible for Christianity to be fulfilled through other faiths? Wright fears that this suggests "the revelation of God in Christ and the scriptures needs correction, improvement or addition" (p256). However, any "correction, improvement and addition" can be seen as applying to the *understanding* of the revelation, rather than to the revelation itself. Respondent 9 was keen to take 'new looks' at things; respondent 5 used the concept of *karma* to help him reflect on the way current existence affected the future; and respondent 8 and 9 had several unanswered questions about the nature of Christ's resurrection and ascension: all of which suggests that the Christian group were seeking beyond the revelation they had so far received.

FIVE: A JOINT MISSION

> "On the basis of common humanity, in fulfilment of God's purpose that mankind [sic] should subdue and rule the earth and in accordance with the Christian ethic of love, Christians not only may but must enter into dialogue, at the level of living, with people of other religions" (Langley p22)

The Sikh faith shares this imperative with Christianity. It is natural, then, that both groups should have responded positively to the suggestion that one of God's purposes in bringing faiths together might be that they share in a mission to the world, not to convert it to one faith or another, but to exercise a God given stewardship.

Charitable works were immediately identified by respondent E, and concern for the poor and needy by respondent 9 as areas of possible joint action; and both groups were supportive of cooperation over these issues. However, there was also a spiritual dimension identified by respondent 8, who pointed out that belief in a supreme being unified the two faiths. This was elaborated by respondent 9 who spoke of a possible joint mission with those of other faiths in promoting the sense that there was more to life than material values: "Society is impoverished when religious perspectives on life are excluded or marginalised" (Inter Faith Network p3).

Respondent 9 noted that the very fact of respectful inter-faith work was in itself a social witness to a divided society, a point also made by respondent J. Respect is a key feature of current multi-faith religious education, and the way in which both communities contribute to and respond to this (eg through the Education Authority group, S.A.C.R.E.) can enhance their witness. Past religious conflict has "contributed to a cynicism in the wider world about religious belief and practice" (Inter Faith Network p4), and so it is also possible to see inter-faith cooperation as a joint mission to reestablish the credibilty of religion, as well as having a social function.

SIX: THE UNKNOWN

Wright criticises the IFCG report because it "avoids the hard issue of objective truth" (p254): but surely the one clear truth in religious matters is that 'objectively' we can say very little. Of those things which seem to divide faiths, many may be cultural (see **THREE** above), but even those items which are essentials of belief may be objectively unverifiable. When asked what 'articles of faith' fell into this latter category, respondent 1 felt it was the majority, and respondent 5 considered that Christians might be surprised by what they could 'put on one side' when entering into inter-faith dialogue - as far as he was concerned none of the Christian beliefs was certain.

In discussions with members of other faiths Cooling acknowledges there are some matters which will never be known until 'the end' and it is as well to put them aside until then (*RE and the Moral Debate*, lecture for Oldham LEA, 17/11/94). Even Wright has to concede that the salvation of sincere seekers of other faiths "cannot be denied outright. It leaves the final decision where it rightly and exclusively belongs - in the hands of our Creator God" (p250) Perhaps this represents the only valid exclusivism - the necessary exclusion of humanity from an ultimate understanding of God.

However, to put certain 'articles of faith' aside in the interests of fruitful dialogue need not be seen as a threat to belief or integrity. Respondent 1 remarked that if it was accepted that Christians were not going to become Sikhs, nor Sikhs Christians as a result of their encounter, then it was possible to put divisive and unverifiable beliefs aside for the duration, safe in the knowledge that they would be taken up again in due course.

SEVEN: CONTINUING REVELATION

The IFCG, in its report, sees Biblical formation as 'process' in cultural interaction, and adduces this to support ongoing inter-faith dialogue (see Wright p237). To this approach, Wright objects that "We are left with no clear assessment of the role of the completed canon of Scripture" (p238). However, this implies that a "completed canon" truly reflects God's will: it can be argued that the finality of scriptural canons, as well as seeking to exclude error, owes much to a desire to consolidate power over doctrine, and is thus a very human aspect of any faith.

There is something inherently dead in finality - seeming to run counter to the life of an evolutionary Creation. It is possible to bring this deadness into inter-faith dialogue, if it is viewed as having an unequivocal conclusion. Far more in tune with the Creation of the One whom both Sikhs and Christians worship is an unending inter-action, in which each faith is constantly enabling the other to evolve its understanding of God, and through which God's revelation can continue.

Respondent 8 spoke of the Spirit who "will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13), as an indication that all was not yet revealed, and that fundamentalism therefore denied the work of the Holy Spirit. Respondent 10 said that this continuing work of the Spirit kept her going and stopped her

becoming stale. Respondent 9 spoke of the risks, but also the excitement involved in being open to the work of the Spirit. Staleness is surely not as appropriate as excitement in rendering glory to God - and it was in providing new ways in which to glorify God that respondent H identified the most important gift the faiths could give to each other.

CONCLUSIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

Respondent H spoke of 'getting our own house in order' before working with others, but this observation does not necessarily represent an antithesis. All communities of faith face a difficult time in this materialistic age, and it is perhaps in supportive dialogue with each other that these two communities, and faith communities in the wider context can help one another with their common difficulties. If the result of dialogue is a better understanding by each community of the true heart of its own faith, then that essence can better be communicated to a new generation and each community can better discharge the stewardship of its own inheritance.

Society too faces difficult times, and by addressing some of the issues together, both communities can discharge the responsibilities laid upon them by their faith, and also be a living example of cooperation to a divided world. People of different faiths have learned to respect each other by the sheer force of the example of each other's spiritual lives: similarly, a diverse society may learn something about tolerance and respect by the example of two faith communities working together in love and unity of purpose.

Finally, by working together as two distinct faiths which maintain their own structure and integrity, rather than attempting to *share* a centre or structure, the communities can help forge a new model of inter-faith relationship: not Hick's 'Copernican' model, limited to a single solar system, but a 'Hubblite' model of faiths as discrete and internally diverse solar systems within galaxies, within the universe. The problem of agreeing

a 'centre' disappears with this model since galaxies are of varying, not necessarily concentric shapes; and the universe itself, having no boundary, cannot logically *have* a centre. God then ceases to be the centre, forcing the faiths into some kind of uniformity, but is rather the limitless universe itself in which the solar systems of the faiths have their being.

As humanity can begin to grasp the nature of its own solar system but not the universe, so believers can build a picture of their own faith, but not ultimately of God - and this is the value of the 'religions', whether or not they are human constructs (see Cantwell Smith et al, p10 above): as the universe is ever expanding, so is humanity's understanding of God through the continuing interaction of the faiths.

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